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Nell Howes Trent

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Date Dec. 8, 1973

Amnette L. Doyan
(Signature - Interviewee)

Address

Date Dec. 8, 1973

Nell Hoover Trent
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ALB: My name is Annette Boyan. Today is November 7, 1973 and I am speaking with Mrs. Nell Howes Trent about education in Appalachia.

NHT: The persons on that land must be careful of what they, of the crops they raise and the food they raise, particularly of the food they raise. Let me see, what was I going, where was I going from the terrain? The crops were not especially good and yet there was food provided the residents wanted to raise food that was needed and useful for themselves and their children. This thing they did. They raised wheat and had it ground at the mills. They raised corn, they had mill, ground at the mills. They raised vegetables which they canned or dried for winter use. The apple hills and cabbage hills is one of those ways of preserving food that I find interesting to a number of people. The hills, as we called them, were hollowed out portions of the surface of the earth in which drainage played an important part. I said hollowed out, and I mean hollowed out for the cabbage heads were placed side by side, some lower of course than others. The apples were placed at one side of the hill and the children were very happy when the apple side was open during the winter for they had tired of the dried food or canned food for that time. I am dwelling on food for food conduces to well being and happiness of people, both desirable actions or qualities for the residents of a land. Long afterwards, and that means tens, in tens of years, food was prepared and brought into that part of the country so that the apple holes and cabbage holes and cans of food and dried food were not, were dropped quite a while ago. Now that is enough for food. We'll talk now about shall I say education?

ALB: That's fine.

NHT: Education was the top idea in the minds of the residents of the section where I was raised. Of course the schools were more simple than today, teaching chiefly reading, writing, and arithmetic. But the basic was there and the minds were there to

use those basics to proceed to higher ground. My first teaching was in the small town of Milton. By the way, the town of Milton was named for Milton Rece, "RECE", my grandfather's brother. The school had the primary group had been rather small, but it grew to such an extent that a division in the class was necessary. At that time, the schools were authorized by three men called trustees. The trustees told the teacher who had been appointed to teach those students for nine months, to divide the class as she wished to divide it. She divided it by giving me all the boys in the class and she kept all the girls in the class. So for the nine months period I taught small boys. I enjoyed it, I liked teaching.

ALB: What grade would that be equivalent to?

NHT: They would be what is now considered first graders. From that we, the trustees put seats for all those children in a small vacant house that had been used for business. Painted the walls, some of the walls black and gave us chalk, white, to write on as we wanted it, wanted it to teach. From that school as I remember, thirty plus students, I received twenty three dollars a month for my service for eight and a half months that year. The next year I taught at a school much more rural. It was very hilly place, approximately five miles from home. That school was quite amusing. It was a small building, a small frame building in which I taught both boys and girls. School at that time was supposed to begin in August and continue for nine months. Along the eaves of the building were several wasps' nests. No one thought about knocking the wasp nests down before school opened. So one day as I was teaching a wasp got under my clothes and stung me. I felt that I could not let the children know that something like that had happened to the teacher. The teacher must be above being stung by a wasp, so I caught up my dress and caught the wasp in the clothes and crushed it. Another amusing thing happened during that term of school. One girl was very talkative and realizing that I couldn't teach a class with someone talking,

and my purpose was always to teach the best possible, I told her that if she did not stop talking in class that I must keep her, punish her in some manner. So the punishment was to keep her in when the other children went out to recess. Her father was one of the trustees who had hired me, but he was not happy with the keeping of the girl in. So he told his son who was janitor of the building to come for him if I kept the girl in and did not let her go out with the others. The boy ran as soon as I let the girl, the group out and the children immediately raised a cry. His daddy said for him to come and get the father if I kept the girl, when and if I kept the girl in. So the young teacher immediately said "Well, I'll raise the window and you can, you all can go out except this one, and go out and have your play time." "When I ring the bell you must come in and sit down pass school." The teacher had learned that it was illegal in West Virginia to disturb a class. The father came. He had a key to unlock the school door but was so excited that he couldn't use his key and get the door unlocked. And when he said, "Let me in teacher." "I'm not going to hurt you or the children." That created a big laugh. The door was opened, the situation changed immediately. Another school, another one of those rural one room schools came up and of course they, by that time the teacher was getting a little better settled in her work and no ridiculous happenings took place. From that school we went on to another one, another one room school with a number of boys and girls of various areas of learning. We did the best we could with that, the best we thought we could, and went on to a time when rural schools were ruled out, I should say planned to, the school system was planned to go from a small rural one room schools to what we call graded schools.

ALB: When did you first begin teaching?

NHT: How's that?

ALB: When did you first start teaching?

NHT: I began teaching at, I think age nineteen. I was born

in September, 1881. And I began teaching in 1900.

ALB: Were there any qualification to become a teacher?

NHT: The qualifications at that time were set up to attend and be examined by a county board of education. They were a county board of course, were persons we knew and with whom we had lived and gone on for some years. The certificates awarded by that county board of education were numbered one, two, and three. The number one of course being the highest. Those who received a number one certificate of course felt proud of it and were hired first. If there were any leftovers they were likely to be only those who had been awarded a third grade certificate. We went on that way for a number of years until a state organization was set up to get, to prepare questions and grade the answers for teachers for the West Virginia schools.

ALB: Want to tell us about punishment? What you did to the students? How you corrected them if they did something wrong?

NHT: From the rural schools I went to Saint Albans in 1909 and was principal of a small school on the west side of Coal River. From Saint Albans, Kanawha County I came to Huntington in 1913 and have been in Huntington ever since. I taught at, I was appointed to help establish the first junior high that was established in Huntington and went on teaching in junior high over a period of years. When a teacher starts with that age of children, children or young people, whatever you want to call them there's usually from twelve to sixteen and maybe seventeen years of age. They form disciplinary problems. If a teacher can get along with that discipline, that teacher is kept right there in junior high. In '47 I fell, what is the word I want to use? I reached retirement age anyway of sixty five which I've always thought was a dumb thing to bring to anybody. My idea of course is not that of the top group, but I feel you should encourage people to work, rather than keep them out of work. It's the working class that causes this country to produce and continue producing. It's what makes us all strong. And after I was retired, an

opportunity came to work with Professional Nurses Registry. I was glad enough to be busy at something productive so when the head of the organization passed on, I was asked to take over the organization and go on with it. I left the Professional Nurses Registry at the beginning of '73. That meant a working life from 1900 to 1970, to 1973. I have to leave a name out here. One of the men in Cabell County who had much to do with schools asked me while I was teaching he said much of my last teaching was done in commerce, my major was in commerce. And he submitted four or five commerce texts to me to say what I thought was the best of the texts. And one that was very good and written clearly and plainly gave about three ways of putting that information in student's mind. You read your text. At the last of the chapter you'd have a choice, multiple choice. You might have a yes, no choice. There was a third one. I don't recall quite what it was. But to me when you read the thing and made your choice or yes, read it and made your choice which answer was correct, that, that second impression was very important. Okay. The superintendent as soon as I was retired he changed, he dropped out that good book and put in a much easier one. Next time I met him I said, "Hey! I'm told you dropped out the book that I chose for commerce and put in an easier one." "Well," he said, "These young ones can't learn." "They need an easier book." I said, "What are you telling me?" "Well, you know they can't learn." I said, "Now please tell me how you got that idea." "Well," he said, "So many of them fail." Well I knew blooming well that that was the teacher's fault. But he said that they, that West Virginia boys and girls could not learn those things as well as those from other states and it's just as big mistake as anybody could make. Just dumb as door. We have many boys and girls born and raised in West Virginia who've reached high places. Here's another one he did. He did not give a year's course in science in high school. The son at one of my friends went to University of Pennsylvania, Harrisburg. And as it got late in the year, as it was already late to be matriculated. And got later, when he entered his first class, it was a woman teacher in science and he found that up to that time didn't know there was

a requirement of a year in science. He said to his seat mate, "I don't know what I'm going to do." "I didn't understand a thing she said." And they talked along till the other young man was convinced that he didn't know. You better get some tutoring. So he said, "I'll tell you Arthur, the, I know a man who will tutor you, but it's sixty dollars an hour." "And you'll have to convince him also that you will learn the thing." Okay. He called his parents and his parents said, "Well go ahead and try the tutoring." "It's too late to, for you to matriculate in another college or university." The young man now, well he'd been with a company in northern Ohio for some years and has just been sent abroad to meet with people in three countries and convince them that their operations here and what would be good for them to do. When the superintendent was told what had happened and the family had to pay their sixty dollars an hour for tutoring, he said, "Well it was there for him." "It wasn't my fault he didn't get it." And it wasn't even offered. I have as much patience. I don't believe that good Lord gave people of Ohio, Michigan, Ohio or Michigan any better sense than he gave West Virginia boys and girls. I just don't believe it. I've seen too much poor teaching to believe it's anything but the poor teachings rather than the students.

ALB: What do you think about the students' attitude?

NHT: Well my friends tell me that I wouldn't like teaching today. I loved my teachings. But they tell me that I wouldn't like it today. I don't know. I don't know enough of the hippie group to how I would work with then if I were teaching. But I certainly would put out every effort possible. I would, as the old folks used to say, "rack my brain" to find something that would interest them. And I think I could find it. Now one of the periods Marshall, my degree is not all from Marshall, I've had class in other universities. But we had a Yale man one summer teaching Paradise Lost. And when I got a group that came to me very tired.

ALB: Okay.

NHT: When I would, there was a teacher, there was one group that I, that came to me from a teacher who would, who wanted to leave her room and stay out a long time or quite a while at any rate. And we had workbooks in that commerce course. And she would tell them, I didn't learn until after a long time, now your work today will begin with page so and so and continue to page so and so. And you must read that and then go to your workbook and fill in the answers. And if you don't get that all done in this period, you will be failed. You'll get a failing grade. Well, she give them so much work than when they got to me, they were tired and worn. When I would find that my class come to me tired and worn I would tell them something interesting. And surprisingly one of the things that they were interested in, believe it or not, was Paradise Lost. And when I told them about Paradise Lost and why the author wrote it, his reasoning, that if he, he'd wanted for years to write something that he would be remembered by in hundreds of years after he was gone, and why he chose Paradise Lost was because others had written of things you've got to if you're going to be in, if you're going to write something that lasts over the ages, you've got to go beyond this world and write of something beyond the world. And he chose that something as Paradise Lost. And went on and wrote his Paradise Lost. And of course this Yale man, that gave us that summer was good, he knew what he was doing and he was beyond this, well ordinary teaching.

ALB: Miss Howes, getting back to one room schools, can you tell us more like what the inside, the classroom was really like, like the seats?

NHT: How was that now? Tell you about what?

ALB: About the classroom and the one room school? You know, what kind of seats the students had, if they had blackboards or notebooks and books?

NHT: We did not have libraries to call on and that's for sure. We had only our textbooks and whatever we

brought to the students had to be something if we gave them anything that was that would interest them and broaden their minds, we had to draw on our own learning to give them. Does that answer your question?

ALB: Well did the students have notebooks or did they have chalkboards?

NHT: No notebooks, we had no notebooks. There wasn't any plan made for that, for taking notes on what had been given, none whatever. There was just the, if you had a reading class they had their readers. By the way, McGuffey readers, they readers were McGuffey's readers and another big mistake that was made in West Virginia was to discard McGuffey's readers and take up readers that someone thought were better. I would say that McGuffey's readers were far better than the others adopted because, now I'll get back to the pot bellied stove business, they were, the McGuffey's for example. If momma had said don't lie, don't be lazy, don't do so and so and so, morals and ethics, she taught morals and ethics. And McGuffey taught morals and ethics throughout his reader. He followed what mother said. One illustration of that was the boy that called, "Thief! Thief!" and about the sheep. He kept calling when nothing was happening and when he needed help, he couldn't get it. Seats, generally, in the rural schools were made by carpenters, home done seats. I remember one child in particular. I heard some, you can't use this one. They called pot bellied stoves, looked as if they were, as if they might have started out as the same, what do I want to say? The same thickness all the way through, but they became pot bellied because they started at one circle at the bottom and swelled out for a place for fire and narrowed down later on to carry off the smoke. And they burned whatever was available, of course, we burned coal. And I've heard of a number of teachers say that they walked to school themselves mornings and started the fire to make sure that the building was warm when the children reached school. I never build fires myself

because I always had a janitor who would come and build the fire. Now let's see. The blackboards were, for the most part, painted. The inside of a building would be painted black for the blackboard. And we always had plenty of chalk. And we cleaned the blackboards ourselves, whatever it needed in the way of washing or erasure. Now does that answer?

ALB: Did you have any problems with children not coming to school? Like they might have to stay home and do chores, or they just didn't want to come to school?

NHT: We had truant officers who would require children to go to school or their parents would be fined for them staying out. They, I didn't have much trouble with them, with anything like that for I tried to make school interesting to the students. I would have something to tell them or something to say that they wanted to hear, just like I did about the Paradise Lost. When they, coming in, going to school and sitting in the seats for some hours is burdensome particularly to boys. And we've never found a way to teach boys without the "sit end" get quiet. And if someone could find a way to teach a boy his subject, whatever it might be, while he got up and moved around, it would be a blessing to schools and to the boys. A whipping to me, is a personal, oh what is the word I want to use? Degradation. Whipping degrades a child. It takes from their own personal pride in themselves and one must have personal pride in themselves if they do something that is valuable to themselves or to the country at large. They must have pride not degradation.

ALB: Well what time did school start in the morning?

NHT: It usually started at nine o'clock and continued with one hour off, twelve to one, and went on to four.

ALB: And then they had lunch and recess from twelve to one?

NHT: A short recess periods probably, somewhere along in the, somewhere between nine and twelve there'd be a fifteen minute recess that they could get up and run

around. And between one and four there would be another short recess period that they could get up and run around. Get outside and go. Now we done away with those periods and used that period to move from class to class and get their recreation, get a break, as we say in that part of the day's work.

ALB: Well from twelve to one did the students go home for lunch? Did they bring their own lunches?

NHT: They could either go home for lunch if they lived near enough or bring their lunches. And we've done away with that by giving them school lunches, having lunch, serving lunch at school.

ALB: When you first started teaching, did all the students have to walk to school? Did they have a long walk or was the school pretty, right in the center of the community?

NHT: The trustees tried to have the school buildings, place their school buildings in a place where a child would not have to walk too far. In my own case, in the whatever extra schooling we might have and we had some extra in the spring. We, I walked, we walked two miles downtown to the extra school term. But that was the longest walk that I had, I ever know of. But we walked two miles morning and two miles back home.

AEB: What do you mean by the extra school term?

NHT: I mean by, that would be beyond the some schools had the eight months term, the six months term, seven months term or eight month term and this extra if you wanted extra school to reach your nine months you had an extra term of school in which to get it, but that was used only for those who wanted to go beyond the shorter terms of school.

ALB: Well in the last couple of years we've had alot of talk about dress codes and how long you could wear your hair and if you had to wear socks. Did you have any kind of dress codes for the students?

NHT: Nothing, nothing. The children, no problems or no consideration even given to a dress code. There was not money available for a code of dress. If one wanted it you were lucky if you, if the clothing was clean and not smelly.

ALB: Did the teachers have a dress code?

NHT: None whatever. Never was mentioned or even thought of. We in, you don't want this, course you shouldn't use it.

ALB: About what age did the students start school?

NHT: Did the students start? Six and that seems to have been set up and kept up for a long, long, long time.

ALB: And they didn't have any regulations? Like when I started school you had to have your shots.

NHT: Had to have what?

ALB: Your shots, like your booster shot and vaccination. And you had to have your birth certificate to prove that you were six years old.

NHT: No requirements. No, what's the word I want to say? No legal requirements of the child's age. I never heard of one.

ALB: About how many students did you have in your class?

NHT: In junior high I've had as many as forty two. That was unusual. But I have had as many, I mentioned that the first school where I taught there were too many students that the one teacher couldn't take care of the large class and the trustees gave her the privilege of dividing her class and had hired me as a teacher. And gave her the privilege of dividing them. I had close around thirty and she kept, I don't know how many she kept, probably about even. Anyway she kept all the girls and sent me all the boys. So she must have had as many as, somewhere in the neighborhood of sixty.

ALB: Well now my understanding of the one room school you had first, second, third graders. You had them all mixed together?

NHT: Right.

ALB: How did you teach? Did you take an hour to teach the first graders? And what did the rest of the students do while you were teaching one grade?

NHT: Often times we would use an older student to help teach the younger ones. A younger child was having problems about reading or pronunciation, we could put an older child with them while we taught some others in, where their weakness stood out. We used that right much to help those who were needy, needed help.

ALB: Did you give. . .

NHT: The teacher helped those older ones who needed help and the younger and the younger person, well to help the small ones to start them.

ALB: Did you have a grading system like we do today? A, B?

NHT: No grades. No grading system. We taught them from what they needed. Where they were. A graded schools as, for example. When I wanted algebra I said to the principal or to the teacher, "Can you teach algebra?" And he said, "Yes." So I got an algebra text and he taught two or three of us algebra, where we tried to understand what it meant, what was meant, and if we couldn't understand what the text said we would go to him for help.

ALB: But as far as grades, if they covered the material they were supposed to know they just got promoted to the second grade?

NHT: Yes. If in the teacher's judgment the child read well enough to go along and learn and use words beyond what he was using, we let him have his second reader. It was in the teacher's judgment.

ALB: When you first started teaching did most students just go to school until the eighth grade and then quit?

NHT: I don't, I would say that they came nearer going to school when they wanted to than if they were satisfied with the learning they had, and felt they didn't want anymore. That was when they quit.

ALB: Was it mostly the girls or the boys that quit?

NHT: It was boys mostly who quit. As I said a while ago, I thought we had never learned how to have a school in which the boys did not have to sit down in a seat when they hated it so bitterly. It's not a boy's nature to sit in a seat and be quiet over a period of time. And we need to adjust in some way to that particular thing. Instead of going and sitting down, the girls don't mind to go and sit down in a seat, but the boys hate it.

ALB: Did you ever have any trouble from the parents as to what you were teaching their children, or if you corrected one of their children from doing something wrong?

NHT: They, we had a number, there were always a few children who went home and told tales that the teacher was mean to me today. She made me do so and so. And the teacher, well some parents would say if you have any problems with the teacher, if you get punished when you come home you're going to get the second dose of it. That child never gave, or rarely ever gave the teacher any trouble, disciplinary trouble. If they thought they were going to catch it when they went home. Now a few, a very few parents would believe the child and think that the child, their child was telling the truth. But not very many. There was an older man who came to me, a very amusing episode. He, his, he had a young wife and two or three children. The girl was going to school to me at Buffington, that was about the second year I was in Huntington. And the girl, well she didn't take to school very well, she just wanted to have her own way and get up and walk

around when she wanted to and so on. And I would make her sit down and be quiet. So she told her mother that I was disagreeable with her and punished her. And the mother told the father. I'll never forget the older gentlemen coming to school and telling me that I was so unpleasant with his daughter and so on and so on. I said, "Mr. Jones," or whatever he was, "your daughter wants to, doesn't want to accept quiet and order in school and we must have quiet and order if we, if we teach and reach all the children." "Now an embarrassing thing happened yesterday." "I do have your daughter sit down on this front seat at the side of the wall." "And when two ladies came in to visit school, the, your little girl leaned over and as they were passing her to go around and sit in a back seat." "And as they passed your little girl, she was reaching out to look at them and reached so far that she lost her balance and almost fell in front of them." "Okay, well I must be kinder to the child." He got out, and that was second floor. He got out to the head of the stairway and came back and told me to discipline the child.

ALB: Today there's alot of talk about religion in the schools.

NHT: How's that?

ALB: There's alot of talk about religion in the schools.

NHT: There was no discussion, there was very little or not discussion in the school regarding religion. It never came up as a problem. I would say that probably one of our most, one of the most difficult problems I met and this wasn't definitely religion, but it was awfully close to it. One, a faith healer came to Johnson's Lane. Well Johnson's Lane was known that was a division street between Huntington and Central City. And this woman stood up there as a faith healer. And when I went back to school one morning, three or four children came following right after me and they weren't supposed to come in the room, but they did and I didn't send them back. If they wanted to ask questions I was willing to answer. Okay. "Have you seen this

faith healer?" They didn't call her a faith healer, they called her something else. The woman at, on Johnson's Lane. "No I haven't, what is it, what do you want to say about it?" "Well, mother was at a meeting last night and she healed somebody who was sick." Well, I thought here it comes.